



## A Leader's Legacy

By Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner

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### Introduction

Are you on this planet to do something or are you here just for something to do? If you're on this planet to do something, then what is it? What difference will you make? What will be your legacy?

Leadership isn't solely about results. Success in leadership isn't measured only in numbers. Being a leader brings with it a responsibility to do something of significance that makes families, communities, work organizations, nations, the environment and the world better places than they are today.

The purpose of leaders is to mobilize others to serve a purpose. And if you're here to serve a purpose, the purpose comes first. You'll have to make sacrifices in service of that purpose. In this age of reality shows like *Survivor*, *The Apprentice* and *The Amazing Race*, it might appear to some that success is winner-take-all and at all costs. But that's not true.

When people talk about leadership, they often use the word passion. And when we think of passion, we tend to think of emotions such as enthusiasm, zeal, energy, exuberance and intensity. Well, all those attributions might be true, but if you look up the word passion in any dictionary that includes origins you'll see that it comes from the Latin word for suffering.

Passion is suffering! A passionate person is someone who suffers and a compassionate person is someone who suffers with and shares the suffer-

ing of others — and wants to take action to alleviate this condition. Nearly every act of leadership requires suffering — and often for the leader a choice between one's personal success and safety, and the greater welfare of others. Nothing great comes without costs.

Leadership is hard work. At times we'll suffer, and those we love and cherish will suffer, if only because of the tradeoffs we have to make between our own career interests and those of the greater good. If you want to be a leader, you must be willing to pay a price. By sacrificing, you demonstrate that you're not in it for yourself. That sends the message, loud and clear, that you have the best interests of others at heart.

The most significant contributions leaders make aren't to today's bottom line but to long-term development of individuals and institutions that adapt, prosper and grow. People should never take on the job of leadership if they're unwilling to see beyond their own needs. If they do, they'll ultimately fail.

We'll all be remembered for something. The question is, for what? What will others say about you when you're no longer around? Each of us lives on in the memories we create, in the systems and practices we set in place (or don't), and in the lives we touch. We guarantee that what people will say about you won't be about what you've achieved for yourself, but what you've achieved for others. Not how big a campfire you built, but how

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well you kept others warm, how well you illuminated the night to make them feel safe, and how beautiful you left the campsite for those who would come after you to build the next fire.

## The Best Leaders Are Teachers

The best way to learn something is to teach it to someone else. No matter whether you're a leader or a student, if you're really serious about helping others learn, you start to think, study and prepare from the moment you're asked to take on that role. In that process, you become consumed by learning. You know you're on the line. You know you're going to have to perform live in front of others, and you'd better have your stuff down cold.

One of the things that leaders do is to mentor and teach. And when they're teaching — at least, when they're teaching with intensity — they're learning. Each and every interaction you have with your associates can be framed as a learning opportunity for them — and for you.

Take a performance appraisal, for example. You can view it as a perfunctory exercise in describing someone's scores on certain measures and competencies, or you can look at it as a mutual learning opportunity. These sessions become mutual learning opportunities when you approach them as chances for people to *teach* you about their strengths, weaknesses, aspirations, goals, disappointments, confusions, vulnerabilities and the like. They become mutual learning opportunities when you approach them as chances for you to *teach* your associates about your own struggles with these issues and what you've learned from your experience, and for them to *teach* you about the same.

It transforms the experience from a monologue to a dialogue. It also elevates your relationships from boss-subordinate to mentor-protégé.

But there's a second lesson to keep in mind about this element of teaching and mentoring: our teachers continue to teach as we go on to tell their stories. Each

of us, whether we intend to or not, will become at some point a character in someone else's story. We all talk about people when they're not around, and others will talk about us when we're not around. The obvious question is: what will they say?

That should make each of us wonder about a few things:

- What lessons am I teaching in every interaction I have? The "moral of the story" I'm relating may be obvious, but what else am I teaching? Am I even aware of it?
- What stories will others tell about me in the future? What will others learn from those stories? What's the legacy being passed along? What's the legacy I want to pass along?
- What am I learning from others as I teach?

Put that together with some lessons Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner discovered when analyzing the teaching evaluations at the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University, where they work. The most highly rated teachers are those who are most enthusiastic about their material.

That probably squares directly with your own experience. When you're in a class with someone who's truly passionate about a subject, don't you get

jazzed about it? Doesn't that person really turn you on to the subject? Don't you wish all your teachers could be that way?

The same applies to leaders. The best leaders are the most passionate about their work, their organizations and their disciplines. Their enthusiasm is contagious, and others catch that enthusiasm and display it in their own work. Those are the leaders we'll tell the most positive stories about in the future. Those are the teachers who continue to make a difference long after we, and they, have moved on.

## We All Need Loving Critics

The late John Gardner, leadership scholar and presidential advisor, once remarked, "Pity the leader caught

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between unloving critics and uncritical lovers.” That phrase should be put on a poster to hang over every leader’s desk — or a screen saver on every leader’s computer — and it should be read and contemplated several times a day.

None of us likes to hear the constant screeching of harpies who have only foul things to say. We close our ears to constant complainers who are predictable in their whining. At the same time, we never benefit from, nor truly believe, the sycophants whose flattery is obviously aimed at gaining favor. To stay honest with ourselves, what we really need are “loving critics” — people who care deeply enough about us to give us honest feedback about how we’re doing.

The higher up you go on the corporate ladder, the less likely it is that leaders will ask for feedback about their performance. Leaders want to know how others are doing, but rarely do they ask how they’re doing themselves. Senior executives are quite happy to prescribe 360-degree feedback for others — it’s the rage these days. But when it comes to getting feedback, it’s not for them. And if they’re getting it, that’s probably because an outside consultant or coach told them they should be getting it, not because they took the initiative to ask.

Think about this for a moment. From a behavioral perspective, credibility, which is at the foundation of leadership, is about doing what you say you’ll do. But how can you do what you say if you don’t know how you’re doing? If you never ask for feedback on your behavior and on how well your behavior affects how others are doing, how can you really expect to align your words and actions over the long haul?

There’s solid evidence that the best leaders are highly attuned to what’s going on inside themselves as they’re leading and to what’s going on in others. They’re very self-aware and they’re very socially aware. They can tell in short order whether they’ve done something that has enabled someone to perform

at a higher level or whether they’ve sent motivation heading south.

All leaders want to have a positive impact on performance. It’s part of their legacy. The only way they can know if they’re having the desired impact is to get regular feedback on how they’re doing. Leaders need more loving critics.

The reason that leaders aren’t eager to ask for feedback is that they’re afraid of feeling exposed — ex-

posed as not being perfect, as not knowing everything, as not being as good at leadership as they should be, as not being up to the task. But if you’re a leader, you’re already exposed. You’re effectively dancing naked on the table, so there’s no use pretending you’re wearing clothes.

The better strategy is to accept the importance of seeking feedback about our performance. Learning

to be a better leader requires great self-awareness and it requires making ourselves vulnerable. Make sure you have processes for getting regular feedback.

## Leaders Should Want to Be Liked

Lasting success depends on whether we like our leaders. It’s only logical, then, that all leaders should like to be liked. But leaders often say, “I don’t care if people like me. I just want them to respect me.” *Get real!* That statement is utter nonsense — contrary to everything we know about effective leadership.

Think about it for a moment. Is this a binary choice? Are we restricted to either liking or respecting someone? Can’t we have both? Can’t we both like *and* respect a person?

The leaders people want to follow are the ones for whom they have genuine affection. Love is not too strong a word to use for how the best leaders feel about their constituents and how their constituents feel about them. If you can’t have both liking and respect, then you should choose liking over respect.

Of course, some leaders worry that if they get



close enough to people for them to like the leader, then it will be tough doing the difficult parts of the leadership job — things like firing people, reprimanding them for poor performance or holding them accountable for living up to high standards. A tough truth about leading, however — and one that doesn't get talked about enough — is that sometimes you hurt others and sometimes you get hurt. You can't hit the delete key and eliminate those times from your job. You can't delegate them to others. They come with the territory.

That truth should not deter us from *wanting* to be liked. Being motivated to have others like us will result in more empowering actions on our part than just wanting to be respected. Being motivated to want others to like us will make us more concerned about them than we are about ourselves.

And here's a final piece of advice. If you have people working for you in leadership roles who truly don't care if other people don't like them, then fire them. They may not like you, but everyone else will.

## Conclusion

Legacies aren't the result of wishful thinking. They're the result of determined doing. The legacy you leave is the life you lead. We leave our legacies daily. ●

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## Related Reading

*Leading at a Higher Level: Blanchard on Leadership and Creating High Performing Organizations*, by Ken Blanchard, Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2006, ISBN 0132347725.

*Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing*, by Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., Harvard Business School Press, 2002, ISBN 1578514878.

*The Likeability Factor: How to Boost Your L-Factor and Achieve Your Life's Dreams*, by Tim Sanders, Crown Publishing, 2005, ISBN 1400080495.

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